

DEVELOPING A CURRICULUM FRAMEWORK AND PROGRAM POLICIES FOR IMPLEMENTING CONSISTENT, HIGH-QUALITY CURRICULUM

Guidance for Rhode Island's Early Childhood Education Programs

High-quality early childhood education programs have a curriculum framework and program policies in place to guide teachers in the planning and implementation of classroom curriculum aligned with the RI Early Learning Standards and/or the Kindergarten Grade Level Expectations (GLEs).

These documents:

- Reflect research and best practices in the field of early childhood education,
- Comply with the educational and structural standards set forth in Rhode Island Department of Education's Standards Comprehensive Early Childhood Education Program standards,
- Comply with other federal, state, or local regulations governing the program,
- Result in positive outcomes for all children, including children with special education needs.

Standards 7.1 through 7.7 and Standards 9.1 through 9.4 of the Comprehensive Early Childhood Education Program Standards state that:

(7.1) The program has a written statement of philosophy and a curriculum framework consistent with its philosophy that addresses central aspects of child development and that reflects the community it serves.

(7.2) The curriculum framework articulates that play experiences are the mechanism through which children attain developmentally appropriate goals in all developmental domains.

(7.3) The curriculum framework guides teachers' intentional implementation of evidence-based practices that contribute to positive child outcomes and are consistent with the program's philosophy, goals and objectives.

(7.4) The curriculum framework guides teachers in the development of a daily schedule that is predictable yet flexible and responsive to the individual needs of the children. The schedule provides time and support for transitions, includes both indoor and outdoor experiences, provides for large and small group and individual time, and is responsive to a child's need to rest or be active.

(7.5) The curriculum framework guides teachers to incorporate content, concepts, and activities that foster and integrate the eight RI Early Learning Standards domains of learning: Approaches to Learning, Social and Emotional Development, Literacy, Language Development and Communication, Mathematics, Science, Creativity, and Physical Health and Development.

(7.6) The curriculum framework reflects the program's understanding of how child learning develops and guides teachers in meeting the individual needs of children.

(7.7) The curriculum framework describes the materials and equipment needed to support children's learning that:

- a. Reflect the lives of the children and families**
- b. Reflect the diversity found in society, including gender, age, language and abilities**
- c. Provide for children's safety while being appropriately challenging**
- d. Encourage exploration, experimentation, and discovery**
- e. Promote action and interaction**
- f. Are organized to support independent use**
- g. Are rotated to reflect changing curriculum and accommodate new interests and skill levels**
- h. Are rich in variety**
- i. Accommodate children's special needs**

(9.1) The program has a written philosophy statement and written plan describing how the program supports each child's unique learning style, individual growth and development, and interests.

(9.2) The program has a system that supports teaching staff in developing competencies for implementing differentiated teaching and learning practices to enhance each child's learning and development.

(9.3) The program's written plan guides teaching staff in using a variety of instructional strategies and multi-level learning opportunities based on the assessment of each child's developmental levels, learning styles, and interests.

(9.4) The program's written plan describes a process for serving children with disabilities in inclusive settings and accessing appropriate special education services for children with suspected and diagnosed disabilities.

The following guidance will assist programs to develop a curriculum framework and program policies to guide the implementation of consistent, high-quality inclusive curriculum:

Identifying Core Competencies Needed by Teaching Staff

Standard (9.2) states: The program has a system that supports teaching staff in developing competencies for implementing differentiated teaching and learning practices to enhance each child’s learning and development.

Program administrators must take the time to identify what teaching staff should know and be able to do to plan and implement quality curriculum in their programs. They then use this information to recruit and support teaching staff to continuously improve their teaching practice in ways that directly relate to quality curriculum and outcomes for children.

Specific competencies for teachers commonly fall within the following general categories:

- Health, Safety, and Wellness
- Family, School, and Community Relationships
- Child Development and Learning
- Curriculum
- Observation and Assessment
- Professionalism

To identify the early childhood core competencies needed by teaching staff, programs should consult resources such as:

- Institutes of Higher Education
- RIDE Office of Educator Quality and Certification
- NAEYC and other professional organizations
- BrightStars, RI’s Quality Rating and Improvement System
- The Early Childhood section of RIDE’s website (www.ride.ri.gov) for information on the RI Early Childhood Core Competencies and Career Lattice (draft).

RIDE is currently working with state-wide early childhood experts and stakeholders to update and finalize a set of early childhood core competencies, the RI Early Childhood Core Competencies and Career Lattice, which will include competencies for teachers. Once complete, this information will assist program directors in identifying what staff members should know and be able to do to be successful in implementing quality curriculum.

Developing a Program Philosophy

Standard (7.1) states: The program has a written statement of philosophy and a curriculum framework consistent with its philosophy that addresses central aspects of child development and that reflects the community it serves.

Standard (9.1) states: The program has a written philosophy statement and written plan describing how the program supports each child's unique learning style, individual growth and development, and interests.

Programs must take the time to articulate the philosophies, beliefs, and theories that the program holds to be true and then use these statements as to guide the development of a written curriculum framework and program policies that describe the program's educational services and the expectations of staff.

Programs should engage key stakeholders in the development of a philosophy that references the core elements of quality curriculum aligned with the RI Early Learning Standards and/or the Kindergarten GLEs, reflects their view about how children are supported to reach their full potential, and is based on current research and best practice. A key stakeholder group might include representatives from the management team, teaching staff, parent advisory group, governing board, and early childhood community partners.

To determine if your program needs to either develop or refine its philosophy pertaining to curriculum, program administrators should ask themselves the following questions:

- Does the program currently have a written philosophy statement pertaining to curriculum that is available to program staff, families and other interested people?
- Does the statement reference the RI Early Learning Standards or the Kindergarten GLEs?
- Does the statement include the recognition of children's varying developmental levels, unique learning styles, and interests?
- Does the statement reference the importance of the additional three components of a quality curriculum: how children learn (process), the design of the environment (context), and the role of teachers (teaching and facilitating) to support children's learning?
- Does the statement reference any approaches to teaching and learning that are unique to the program?
- Does the statement reference the program's commitment to support each child's individual growth and development, including children with special education needs in inclusive settings?

- Is the philosophy statement written in a way that is understandable and clear to staff and families?

Program administrators should outline the process they will use for developing and adopting the philosophy. This process will depend on the size and organizational structure of your program and might include some or all of the following steps:

- Convene a group of key stakeholders
- Identify a set of core beliefs
- Create a draft philosophy statement
- Share draft philosophy with parent advisory groups and/or governing board and ask for feedback
- Present draft philosophy to staff and ask for feedback
- Present final draft to advisory groups and/or governing board for approval
- Share final philosophy with staff, families, and community partners

Developing a Written Curriculum Framework

Standard (7.2) states: The curriculum framework articulates that play experiences are the mechanism through which children attain developmentally appropriate goals in all developmental domains.

Standard (7.3) states: The curriculum framework guides teachers' intentional implementation of evidence-based practices that contribute to positive child outcomes and are consistent with the program's philosophy, goals and objectives.

Standard (7.4) states: The curriculum framework guides teachers in the development of a daily schedule that is predictable yet flexible and responsive to the individual needs of the children. The schedule provides time and support for transitions, includes both indoor and outdoor experiences, provides for large and small group and individual time, and is responsive to a child's need to rest or be active.

Standard (7.5) states: The curriculum framework guides teachers to incorporate content, concepts, and activities that foster and integrate the eight RI Early Learning Standards domains of learning: Approaches to Learning, Social and Emotional Development, Literacy, Language Development and Communication, Mathematics, Science, Creativity, and Physical Health and Development.

Standard (7.6) The curriculum framework reflects the program's understanding of how child learning develops and guides teachers in meeting the individual needs of children.

Standard (7.7) states: The curriculum framework describes the materials and equipment needed to support children's learning that:

- a. Reflect the lives of the children and families**
- b. Reflect the diversity found in society, including gender, age, language and abilities**
- c. Provide for children's safety while being appropriately challenging**
- d. Encourage exploration, experimentation, and discovery**
- e. Promote action and interaction**
- f. Are organized to support independent use**
- g. Are rotated to reflect changing curriculum and accommodate new interests and skill levels**
- h. Are rich in variety**
- i. Accommodate children's special needs**

Standard (9.1) states: The program has a written philosophy statement and written plan describing how the program supports each child's unique learning style, individual growth and development, and interests.

The written curriculum framework describes how the program will implement core elements of a quality curriculum aligned with the RI Early Learning Standards and/or the Kindergarten GLEs. Developing the curriculum framework is a key step towards ensuring that consistent, high-quality teaching practices are implemented throughout the program. Teaching staff utilize a curriculum framework to guide the design, selection, and adaptation of learning experiences that reflect the unique characteristics of the children they serve.

The framework helps to ensure that teaching staff plan and implement their classroom curriculum based on commonly-held theories, current research, and promising practices about how children learn and develop. It also ensures that attention will be given to the individual needs and interests within a group, in relation to program goals. The framework should describe how information is obtained from families to learn about children, to develop individual goals for children, to design culturally-relevant learning opportunities, and to help inform overall curriculum planning.

To assess your program's curriculum framework and determine the direction your program will take to either create or improve the existing framework, program administrators should ask themselves the following questions:

- Does the program have a written curriculum framework that includes the domains and learning goals of the RI Early Learning Standards and/or Kindergarten GLEs? (Content)
- As part of the written curriculum framework, is there a description of the important ways children learn including purposeful play, meaningful engagement and social interactions? (Process)

- Does the curriculum framework include a description of the varied teaching strategies and the kinds of interactions that are utilized to support each child’s learning? (Teaching and Facilitating)
- Is there a description of the importance of designing and creating an environment that offers children the opportunities to explore, discover, and feel safe? (Context)
- Does the framework include a description of how teaching staff use curriculum resources when planning classroom-level curriculum?
- Does the program have a system for gathering information from families that is then used to inform curriculum development?
- Is the curriculum framework available and used by all the practitioners throughout the program to guide the implementation of classroom curriculum?

If administrators determine, based on their assessment, that the program should take steps to engage key staff members in the development of a curriculum framework, a plan for moving forward should be developed.

The curriculum framework should begin with a statement about how teaching staff will use the framework to guide the development of classroom-level learning experiences for children (i.e. lesson plans). The content should address the key elements of a quality curriculum as follows:

(1) What Children Should Know, Understand, and Be Able to Do (Content)

Programs may want to:

- List the learning goals for children in all 8 areas of learning, as outlined in the RI Early Learning Standards, or the Kindergarten GLEs, or adapt and augment this list to meet the needs of their particular program (scope),
- Include information on the developmental continuum for each of the learning goals (sequence),
- Augment information within the RI Early Learning Standards or the Kindergarten GLEs with goals and indicators important to the program,
- Ensure that the information included in the content is accurate and credible according to the recognized standards within the discipline of early childhood education.

Programs should then describe how this information is used to guide the development of learning experiences at the classroom level.

(2) How Children Learn (Process)

Programs should draw from theories and research in the field of early childhood to articulate key concepts of child development and learning that guide teaching practice in their program. Examples include:

- Key research on human growth and development that guides teaching practice (i.e. growth and development is orderly and sequential and proceeds from simple to complex; children grow and develop at different rates within each learning area),
- Theoretical perspectives on learning that guide teaching and learning in your program, such as those expressed by Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, Bronfenbrenner, Gardner, and/or the Reggio Emilia approach,
- A statement describing how intentional play experiences are the vehicle through which young children learn and how children learn best in an environment that promotes and encourages exploration and inquiry,
- Key factors that influence children's learning (i.e. child's individual learning needs, social and cultural context, children's interests, and children's learning styles),
- A description of how engagement and social interaction are vehicles through which children learn.

Programs should then describe how this information is used to guide the planning of daily learning experiences at the classroom level.

(3) The Teacher's Role (Teaching and Facilitating)

The curriculum framework should include information on the important role of teacher interactions and the different teaching strategies that will be used in planning and implementing quality learning experiences. Programs should draw from theories and research in the field of early childhood when describing teachers' roles. The description may include information regarding:

- The continuum of teaching strategies that teachers use to support each child's learning,
- NAEYC's *Developmentally Appropriate Practice in Early Childhood Programs* description of intentional practice,
- The balance of individual, small, and large group experiences,
- The balance of teacher-directed and child-initiated activities,
- The teacher's role in individualizing and differentiating teaching based on the developmental level, interests, and learning style of each child,
- Critical teaching skills that support teacher-child interactions related to emotional support, classroom organization, and instructional support.

Programs should then describe how teachers use this information to guide the planning of daily learning experiences at the classroom level.

(4) Materials and Learning Environments (Context)

Programs should describe the importance of designing and creating culturally relevant learning environments that offer children opportunities to explore, discover, and feel safe. The description may include:

- Guidelines for room arrangement and learning centers,
- Use of a daily schedule to provide structure and consistency for children,
- The importance of creating a classroom climate that is positive, nurturing, and stimulating,
- The relationship between environments and materials and children's learning and behavior,
- Guidance for providing space that supports children's quiet or individual time,
- Description of how both indoor and outdoor space is used for learning,
- Information on the selection of culturally-relevant and developmentally appropriate supplies, materials, and equipment that:
 - Reflect the lives of the children and families,
 - Reflect the diversity found in society, including gender, age, language and abilities,
 - Provide for children's safety while being appropriately challenging,
 - Encourage exploration, experimentation, and discovery,
 - Promote action and interaction,
 - Are organized to support independent use,
 - Are rotated to reflect changing curriculum and accommodate new interests and skill levels,
 - Are rich in variety,
 - Accommodate children's special needs.

Programs should then describe how teachers use this information to guide the planning of daily learning experiences at the classroom level.

Linking Curriculum and Child Assessment

Standard (9.3) states: The program's written plan guides teaching staff in using a variety of instructional strategies and multi-level learning opportunities based on the assessment of each child's developmental levels, learning styles, and interests.

Children of the same age are not all alike when it comes to learning. As important as it is to learn about the many things that children have in common, it is equally and possibly more important to learn about their many differences.

In high-quality, Standards-based programs, administrators and teaching staff recognize that through effective systems of child assessment, teachers obtain a wealth of information regarding children's differences. This information is then used to design rich classroom curricula that:

- Recognizes where each child is on a continuum of learning,

- Reflects their knowledge of children’s unique learning styles and interests,
- Varies instructional strategies in response to the learning styles of children,
- Offers challenging and achievable experiences that appropriately support each child’s growth and development,
- Provides multi-level learning opportunities where children have multiple options and opportunities for learning and expressing what they have learned based on their individual differences.

This strong, inextricable link between child assessment and curriculum planning should be articulated in the written curriculum framework. In this way, teachers are aware of the program’s expectations and administrators are well-positioned to evaluate service delivery and support teachers in ways that have the greatest impact on child outcomes.

Serving Children with Special Education Needs in Inclusive Settings

Standard (9.1) states: The program has a written philosophy statement and written plan describing how the program supports each child’s unique learning style, individual growth and development, and interests.

Standard (9.2) states: The program has a system that supports teaching staff in developing competencies for implementing differentiated teaching and learning practices to enhance each child’s learning and development.

Standard (9.4) states: The program's written plan describes a process for serving children with disabilities in inclusive settings and accessing appropriate special education services for children with suspected and diagnosed disabilities.

High quality early education programs embrace their role in serving all children, including children with special health or education needs, and continuously improve their capacity to serve children in high-quality, inclusive settings.

Programs will want to refer back to their curriculum framework and other written plans to see if they adequately address this important component of program services. Administrators can use the following questions to guide them in assessing their written plans:

- Does the written plan reflect current practices for serving children with special health or education needs in high quality, inclusive settings?
- Does the written plan include a description of the collaborative relationship with other agencies or professionals supporting children with special health or education needs?
- Does the plan describe the processes for accessing services and supports for working with children with special health or education needs?

When developing a plan for serving children with special education needs, programs should consider convening a stakeholder group that includes the Local Education Agency (LEA) and families from the program. In this way, the process that is used for developing the plan will:

- Allow you to define the responsibilities of your program and the LEA when referring, assessing, and serving children with suspected or diagnosed special education needs,
- Strengthen the program's partnership with the LEA,
- Result in agreements between the program and the LEA that describe how the two organizations will work together to best serve children in inclusive settings,
- Include the perspective of families and how they should be included in the process.

Key elements of the written plan should include descriptions of:

- The process for accessing Child Outreach Screening,
- How teachers use Child Outreach screening results to plan for children,
- The process for making a referral when you suspect that a child may have a special education need,
- The role of families,
- How the program works collaboratively with special educators at the LEA to meet the needs of children with diagnosed disabilities.

Once the program's services have been defined, administrators will want to revisit the core competencies established for general education teaching staff and ensure that they include the knowledge and skills needed to work effectively with children, families, and other providers when serving children with special health or education needs in inclusive settings. These competencies may include:

- Developing alternative assessments to recognize children's developmental levels,
- Ability to take advantage of children's individual interests and use their internal motivation for developing needed skills,
- Ability to set high, but alternative expectations that are suitable for the child,
- Determining how to modify activities and design multi-level learning opportunities so that all children participate,
- Providing opportunities for daily success for all children,
- Recognizing that every child in the class is their responsibility rather than assuming someone else will tell them how to educate a child,
- Calling upon a variety of instructional strategies including the ability to adapt materials and rewrite objectives for a child's needs,
- Working as a team member with parents and special education teachers to learn what skills a child needs and to provide the best teaching approach.

Once established, this important set of competencies must be integrated into job descriptions and evaluations systems. Supervisors must assess the strengths and needs of teachers in these critical areas and develop system of support that allows teachers to grow and be supported.

Selecting Curriculum Resources

Many programs utilize commercially-produced curriculum resources to guide teachers in planning and implementing quality curriculum in one or more of the following four elements of a quality curriculum:

- (1) What Children Should Know, Understand, and Be Able to Do (Content)
- (2) How Children Learn (Process)
- (3) The Teacher's Role (Teaching and Facilitating)
- (4) Materials and Learning Environments (Context)

Programs should be thoughtful in their selection of curriculum resources and ensure that the content is consistent with commonly-held theories and current research in the field of early childhood. Curriculum resources should also be selected that promote partnerships with families in the planning and implementation of classroom curriculum.

Questions to consider when choosing curriculum resources include the following:

(1) What Children Should Know, Understand, and Be Able to Do (Content)

- Does it help achieve the various learning goals within the eight domains of learning as outlined in the RI Early Learning Standards or the Kindergarten GLEs?
- Does it encourage development of positive feelings and dispositions toward learning while leading to acquisition of knowledge and skills?
- Does it facilitate integration of content across learning areas?
- Do the expectations allow the children to master current skills as well as provide appropriate challenges that lead to new skill acquisition?
- Is the information in the content accurate and credible according to the recognized standards of the relevant discipline?
- Is this content worth knowing?
- Does it build on and extend children's current knowledge and abilities?
- Does it promote the development of higher order abilities, such as thinking, reasoning, problem solving, and decision making?

(2) How Children Learn (Process)

- Is it of interest to children and to the teacher?
- Is it meaningful for these children and relevant to these children's lives?
- Does it promote interactive learning and encourage the child's construction of knowledge?
- Does it lead to conceptual understanding by helping children construct their own understanding in meaningful contexts?
- Does it expect, allow, and appreciate individual differences?
- Does it foster children's exploration and inquiry, rather than focusing on "right" answers or "right" ways to complete a task?
- Does it promote and encourage social interaction among children and adults?
- Does it encourage active learning and allow children to make meaningful choices?
- Does it provide experiences that promote feelings of success, competence, and enjoyment of learning?

(3) The Teacher's Role (Teaching and Facilitating)

- Does it allow the teacher to make it more relevant by relating it to a personal experience children have had, or can they easily gain direct experience with it?
- Does it permit flexibility for children and teachers to meet the individual and collective needs of children?
- Does it emphasize and specify the teacher's role in supporting children's learning?
- Does it balance child-directed and teacher-initiated interactions?

(4) Materials and Learning Environments (Context)

- Does it lead to the creation of a learning environment that is sensitive to and respectful of cultural and linguistic diversity?
- Does it promote feelings of psychological safety, security, and belonging?
- Are supplies and materials appropriate to the developmental stages of children?
- Does it promote adaptation and accommodation for children with special education needs?
- Are the materials affordable and easily accessible to teaching staff?
- Does it support teachers in implementing critical teaching skills that support positive teacher-child interactions?

Implementing the Curriculum

Adopting a program philosophy, developing a written curriculum framework, and selecting curriculum resources are the first steps towards implementing a quality curriculum. Program leaders must then take steps to implement their plans to ensure that all children receive

consistent quality services and have the same opportunities to grow and develop in positive ways. These steps include:

- Providing orientation, training, and mentoring so that teaching professionals understand the content of the curriculum framework and how it is to be used to guide teaching practice at the classroom level,
- Determining individual teacher's progress in implementing all aspects of the curriculum framework, demonstrating core competencies, and achieving positive outcomes for children,
- Providing professional development to teaching staff to support them in achieving professional development goals and improving outcomes for children.

Resources:

- *Guidelines for Appropriate Curriculum Content and Assessment in Programs Serving Children Ages 3 Through 8: A position statement of the National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Association of Early Childhood Specialists in State Departments of Education, Adopted November 1990*
- *National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Early Childhood Program Standards and Accreditation Criteria, 2005*
- *RI Early Learning Standards Level II Professional Development: Implementing a Standards-Based Program*
- *RI Early Learning Standards Level III Professional Development: The Administrator's Role in Implementing a Standards-Based Program*
- *INTASC Core Standard Competencies*, <http://www.ccsso.org/intascst.html>
- *Council for Exceptional Children*, <http://www.cec.sped.org/index.html>